

Extension of breeding range of Preuss's Cliff Swallow *Hirundo preussi* into south-east Sierra Leone

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Extension de l'aire de nidification de l'Hirondelle de Preuss *Hirundo preussi* au sud-est de la Sierra Leone. L'Hirondelle de Preuss *Hirundo preussi*, une espèce typique de la zone de savane, a été trouvée nicheuse au sud-est de la Sierra Leone, près de Kenema (08°03'N 11°08'W). Ceci étend l'aire de nidification connue de 200 km vers le sud. L'observation de groupes de cette espèce sur des sites côtiers en Sierra Leone indique également une extension de l'aire de distribution. Une expansion similaire a été observée dans les pays limitrophes, ce qui pourrait être un signe de la détérioration des conditions dans la zone forestière ouest-africaine.

Preuss's Cliff Swallow *Hirundo preussi* is a relatively poorly known West African species found from Guinea-Bissau east to the Central African Republic but with a rather patchy known distribution. In the west of the range there are substantiated records from Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso (Dowsett 1993), with recent reports from Liberia (Demey 2005). Breeding records exist for most range states except Guinea-Bissau and Guinea (Dowsett 1993). Typically, the species avoids the forest zone in most of its range, normally being found in savanna-type habitats (Borrow & Demey 2001).

In Sierra Leone, Preuss's Cliff Swallow has been reported breeding in the far north with sightings from other sites in the north, all within Guinea savanna habitat (Tye 1985). Tye's observations extended the known range south-west by 400–500 km. In 2004–06 we observed Preuss's Cliff Swallows at several sites further south and west throughout Sierra Leone, and recorded breeding at a site some distance further south than previously known in the country.

Our records can be summarised as follows.

- 10 December 2004: over 300 birds at Kambia, near the Guinea border, feeding over the Greater Scarcies River (09°10'N 12°55'W), with several also at the Scarcies estuary at Kychom (08°55'N 13°10'W) on 12 January 2005.
- 22 January 2005: c.170 at Kissy, in Freetown, where the ferry leaves to Lungi (08°30'N 13°15'W).
- 18–23 March 2005: several hundred birds in Kenema (07°50'N 11°10'W), south-east

Sierra Leone, particularly around the small bridge west of the town centre. Breeding was not noted and there was no evidence of nest remains under the bridge in February 2006. None was present in the Kenema area on 24 September–13 October 2005, but up to 30 were around Kenema on 4–10 February 2006.

- 20 March 2005: a breeding colony was found at the abandoned police station at Mano Junction, north-east of Kenema (08°03'N 11°08'W). There were c.20 nests but none was complete (Fig. 1). All were placed under the eaves of the single-storey building. Large numbers were attending these nests, along with a pair of Lesser Striped Swallows *Hirundo abyssinica*. Similar numbers were seen there in February 2006, again nest building. This site is c.200 km south of the breeding localities discovered by Tye (1985).

Discussion

Our records indicate a significant extension of Preuss's Cliff Swallow's breeding range in Sierra Leone, well into the forest zone. Sightings throughout the rest of the country also appear to reflect a shift in range.

Tye (1985) speculated whether his records represented a genuine range expansion or indicated that the species had been previously overlooked. The Kissy area of Freetown is a comparatively well-watched site, and absence of earlier records a good indicator of true absence. Although those at Kenema may have been overlooked in the past, this appears unlikely as the birds are in the vicinity of habitation. The discovery of breeding birds at nearby Mano Junction indeed suggests a genuine

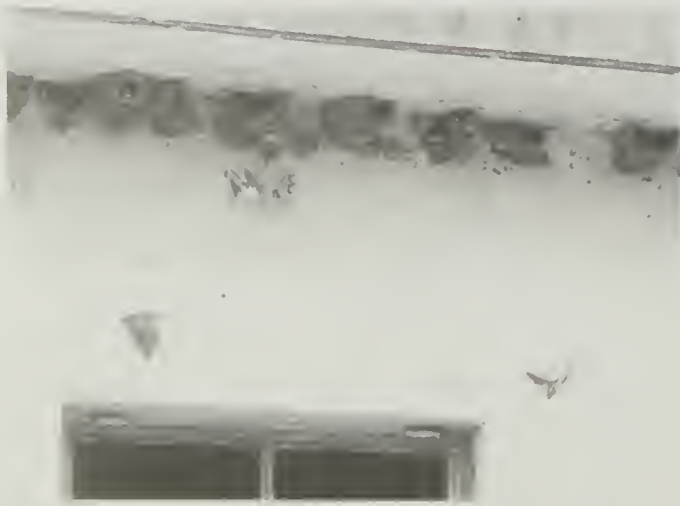


Figure 1. Nests of Preuss's Cliff Swallow *Hirundo preussi* being constructed under the eaves of an abandoned police station at Mano Junction, south-east Sierra Leone, 20 March 2005 (J. Lindsell)

Nids de l'Hirondelle de Preuss *Hirundo preussi* en construction sous l'avant-toit d'un poste de police abandonné à Mano Junction, au sud-est de la Sierra Leone, 20 mars 2005 (J. Lindsell)

expansion in breeding range, consistent with observations from neighbouring countries.

Salewski *et al.* (2001) identified Preuss's Cliff Swallow as one of several species that appears to have shifted its range southwards in Côte d'Ivoire since 1985. They speculated that this may have been due to climate or habitat change, and felt that such a species would not have gone overlooked previously. Movement into the forest zone by this species appears to be confirmed by recent reports of a colony on the Liberian coast (Demey 2005) and a large colony on Ghana's Cape Coast (Demey 2002).

The records from Kenema indicate that the species is probably not resident in the area but a dry-season visitor. This swallow is migratory elsewhere in its range (Keith *et al.* 1992), with presence in coastal areas apparently restricted to the dry season (November–April), despite year-round observer presence.

The expansion in range of a savanna species into the forest zone could be taken as an indicator of the deteriorating condition of the West African forest zone, as Salewski *et al.* (2001) suggest. However, much of the forest clearance in Sierra Leone occurred as long as 100 years ago—e.g. the immediate surroundings of the large town of Kenema have been farm-bush for many decades—suggesting that species such as Preuss's Cliff Swallow do not necessarily respond rapidly to beneficial changes in habitat.

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